

Top 10 High School Books: 1900 vs. 1990

The other day I ran across a [fascinating literature list](#). Reproduced in the chart below, the list hails from the latter part of the 19th century and details the top 10 titles used in high schools in the North Central region of the U.S. As can be seen, several titles tied for the fourth and tenth spots.



Following this discovery, I dug around to see if there was a similar top ten list from more modern times. The most recent I found was [one compiled](#) by Arthur Applebee in 1990 and listed below:



Three brief comparisons come to mind after reviewing these lists.

1. Text Difficulty

After running each title through Accelerated Reader's [text analyzer](#), the modern list wins for the most difficult book – Romeo and Juliet – which measures at a 12th grade level. I was duly impressed.

But when I looked at a number of the other titles on the modern list, I realized that Romeo and Juliet is a bit of an outlier. In fact, when one averages the reading level of each list, the modern list measures at an 8.3 (eighth grade, third month) and the list from the 1800s measures at a 9.4 (ninth grade, fourth month). The older list actually goes up another grade level to 10.1 if one uses the most difficult title from lines four and ten instead of the easiest.

2. Shakespeare's Prevalence

Remarkably, Shakespeare's works have an almost equal showing on both lists, a fact which suggests his writing is as timeless and useful as has been advertised. After all, when teaching Shakespeare [has been found](#) to boost exams by 40 percent, enhance brain activity, and improve writing skills, why wouldn't education systems want to introduce students to his literature?

3. The Presence of Poetry

One of the most obvious differences between these two lists is the presence of 20th century works on the modern list. More difficult to discern, however, is what those works replace, namely, poetry.

While this may not seem like a big deal, it may be what is contributing to the higher level of difficulty on the older list, as poetry features [more complicated syntax](#) than prose. This in turn may be why a study from the University of Exeter [found](#) that reading poetry is more stimulating for the brain and also enables more introspection.

Researchers Jeanne Chall and Sue Conard once examined school textbooks and [found](#) that curriculum content became decidedly easier between 1945 and 1975. Do you think the same thing happened to school literature selections like those shown above?

Furthermore, would you like to see more schools make public listings of the curriculum they use and the books students study so that parents can determine whether or not their children are being shortchanged in their education?